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Troubles cannot be dealt with in isolation

([Roy Garland](#), [Irish News](#))

Desmond Rea, chairman of the Policing Board, called for a commission to deal with what he refers to as our 25-year-long troubles. The reference to 25 years strikes me as odd.

It is arguable that the troubles lasted much longer than 25 years and perhaps they are not over yet.

For me, 1964 – 43 years ago – marked the start of the troubles with the Divis Street rioting but the roots of violence go much deeper.

Assuming that Mr Rea was talking about the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as being effectively the end of the troubles, 25 years would only take us back to 1972-73 – the worst time for murder and mayhem. But to take that period as the beginning would exclude the origins of the Provisional movement and the role of the Ulster Protestant Volunteers who bombed Belfast in 1969.

It would also exclude much of the history of the Orange Order as well as the story of loyalist paramilitaries, the Official IRA and other groups.

The part played by the Irish and British states would be minimised and the origins of the conflict itself would be obscured.

Then again, if people really want to get to the bottom of all this, as some seem to desire, where would we stop? 1969? 1964? The 1920s? Partition? 1916? 1912? The Famine? The Union of 1801? 1690? The Ulster Plantation? Strongbow's 12th-century Anglo-Norman warriors invited here by an Irish chieftain?

Should we investigate the role of the Pope who authorised an English king to bring order and civility to Irish people? Why not investigate the role of all invaders, including the Celts, and whatever consequences they bequeathed to us?

Clearly a totally unbiased explanation of origins is impossible but neither can we fully and objectively explain any 25-year period in isolation.

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To exclude earlier decades and centuries makes the whole exercise seem ludicrous.

It is also impossible to explain the troubles without reference to civil rights and the rise of Paisleyism.

Nor would it seem right to adopt an entirely legalistic and punitive approach centred on the pawns who perpetrated crimes. The foot soldiers were often victims of the machinations of others.

Then again, why single out any specific individual or group when, in truth, origins lie in a complex historical relationship between peoples?

Many participants are long gone. Others are, as Martin McGuinness suggested, tied by codes of honour that preclude members and former members from informing on each other. Loyalists have similar codes.

Nor will the Irish government permit a full inquiry into the role of the Irish state in the late 1960s and neither will the British government reveal the full extent of dirty tricks and manipulation of republican and loyalist paramilitaries and politicians.

Nor should it be assumed that any party to the conflict knows the full truth even about their own activities. Many were infiltrated and manipulated and operated on a "need-to-know" basis.

Evidence was suppressed, distorted or destroyed. Agents are human beings capable of deceit, cover-up and wrongdoing even if honour exists among thieves.

In any case, as members of all terrorist and legitimate groupings know, without minimum support from communities they could not operate effectively.

Therefore to blame perpetrators in isolation is to let the rest of us off the hook.

With no chance of getting the full truth, we are likely to engage in a blame game, seeking scapegoats in order to apportion blame, perhaps as a salve for troubled consciences.

In any case, to suggest that any version of the past is the whole truth is disingenuous. Partial truth or limited knowledge is a dangerous thing that could be hijacked and manipulated to fuel animosity.

Sectarian mindsets are so deeply embedded people will find

excuses to fight the old fight and settle old scores – even if by other means.

Any so-called truth commission could add fuel to the fire, open old wounds and increase bitterness and pain. Many people might find lampooning and demonising scapegoats satisfying at some level but only at tremendous cost to those victimised. Healing will not take place in this way.

Healing requires honest and frank dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation between people.

Too many of us are still segregated from our fellows from the cradle to the grave and it is this legacy of division that needs tackled. As yet we have only been scratching surfaces.

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